



## **SUPPLEMENTARY LETTERS 1975–1997**

This PDF is one of a series designed to assist scholars in their research on Isaiah Berlin, and the subjects in which he was interested.

The series will make digitally available both selected published essays and edited transcripts of unpublished material.

The PDF is posted by the Isaiah Berlin Legacy Fellow at Wolfson College, with the support of the Trustees of the Isaiah Berlin Literary Trust.

All enquiries, including those concerning rights, should be directed to the Legacy Fellow at [berlin@wolfson.ox.ac.uk](mailto:berlin@wolfson.ox.ac.uk)

## SUPPLEMENTARY LETTERS 1975–1997

Most of these letters do not appear in *Affirming: Letters 1975–1997*, being later discoveries. More annotation may be provided later, but for now the texts are made available here for the convenience of readers. Some sources are given at the end of the PDF.

One (asterisked) letter from the published volume is also included, because only a carbon copy was available to the editors; since then a top copy has come to light, and manuscript additions made by Berlin are shown here in this red. The passages omitted from *Affirming* have also been restored, in blue.

See also the further online supplement, '**More Explaining: Isaiah Berlin on His Own Ideas**'.

TO DERRICK PUFFETT

9 May 1975

Headington House

Dear Puffett,

When I last talked to Isaac Stern he was quite clear that it is the Sheldonian he would like to play in – for Wolfson, or for the University, or for some other charity – or whatever (he kindly suggested) I advised. But he did seem set on the Sheldonian. I see that the Curators have behaved badly for the second time (they could easily shift one of the less important concerts to the Town Hall, as you know). I cannot bring myself to press Stern to play in Wolfson in 1975/6 – he plainly does not want to do this, and I don't want to drive him to the point of having to accept reluctantly or flatly refusing. Surely it would be better if he played for Wolfson in 1976/7, if you could get the Sheldonian for him then. But he has no idea of his dates, so it will take some working out.

In the meanwhile, I fear you will have to tell the Music Committee that Isaac Stern in Wolfson in 1975/6 is, very regrettably, not on. The Curators could alter this if they wished – Dr Rosenthal has similar trouble with them about Christoff, who wished to do the same. They really are a terrible lot of people, and their servant Mr Brown, at the Registry, is worse.

Yours,

Isaiah Berlin

SUPPLEMENTARY LETTERS 1975–1997

TO JOHN SPARROW

9 January 1976

Headington House

My dear old friend,

I did not mean Simmonds to lift the matter to such a high level – it was only in answer to his enquiry as to whether I was a something atque verus socius in the query about the Codrington key & I responded in kind. In fact, *no* minutes of the meeting I inevitably missed arrived, either at All Souls (where there was very little post waiting for me), so the infallible Mrs Utechin assures me, who checks every item most scrupulously. If I could have another set I should be grateful: my only reason for wanting it is to discover Michael's new voting system, which I have not seen – otherwise, I should of course not have bothered so much as to mention the matter. But since this is evidently to be discussed next Saturday, I did not think it inappropriate to ask Simmonds where I might obtain this information: but of course I did not (I am delighted to go back to the style of correspondence of more than ten years ago) intend to make a formal demarche upon the subject. I should not dream of occupying your time, etc., etc.

I am beset by telephone calls from many quarters about the Chichele Chair of Social and Political Theory: I stonewall them all – *suave mari magno* ...

Yours ever,

I.B

TO ISAAC STERN

23 May 1976 [*carbon sent as top copy*]

[Headington House]

Dearest Isaac,

These speak for themselves. Puffett is a very nice spastic musicologist, who drives himself fairly skilfully in an invalid chair, and deserves *rachmanut* (or do you still say *rachmonus*?). As you can see, the bureaucracy of the Sheldonian is ghastly, and it would be a kindness if you could send Puffett a swift, preferably telegraphic, message if you can. If you really cannot, at all, then a swift message to put people at Wolfson out of their misery would be a kindness.

I am sure the Rothschild Festival will have gone off triumphantly – I was genuinely concerned about Mrs R's health – she looked somewhat exhausted before she left: this is obviously, in her own mind, her last farewell visit to Israel. I do hope she has not been overdoing it (as if one could avoid that in Jerusalem) – and that you have not either. Some people are much more valuable than others: some kinds of egalitarianism are and always will be totally ridiculous.

Meanwhile we have a ludicrous scandal about peerages, which you may have followed – Bernard Levin's observations in *The Times* of 25 May about Lord Weidenfeld's work among the deprived children of Calcutta, and the performance of the Double Violin Concerto by Lords Grade and Delfont, was vicious but very funny. I cannot bring myself to enclose the clipping – there is a limit to all malice. Besides, I could be accused of anti-Semitism.

Fondest love; I do wish I were there; I am sure this light in the midst of darkness is very welcome in Jerusalem,

yrs ever  
Isaiah

TO PATRICK NEILL

3 April 1978

Headington House

Dear Patrick,

*Euryanthe*, Coliseum, 22 May. I have secured four tickets for this performance – could you both come with Aline and me? It would be exceedingly nice if you would.

I hope the American tour was profitable.

The more I think of it, the more desirable it seems to me that the Research Committee should be charged with thinking about academic policy – the fears of members of the GPC about impingement on their powers seem to me groundless. I doubt, to take an analogous case, if the Council of the British Academy would ever stir from its dogmatic slumber if it were not prodded by what is in effect the Research Committee, which spends something approaching £300,000 a year in grants etc. As it is, exciting and useful reforms in that field have in fact taken place. It may be that the Research Committee would in that case have to be

slightly afforded. It obviously should do more than merely examine the progress and claims to promotion of existing Fellows (or am I being unfair to it? that is all I did in the days when I sat on it – it was somewhat stodgy and immobile in those days). I do not plead for unbridled dynamism, but it plainly could do much more than it does at present.

Which reminds me: Momigliano – I do not know what exactly his status is – expires this summer, and surely ought to be renewed for, say, another three years. He is a man of world prestige and genuine ornament to us, even if he is a little too touchy about the mild criticisms which our fearless Quondams, Fergus Millar and Hornblower, allowed themselves to publish in the *TLS*. I have reminded Peter Fraser (M's college sponsor) and Michael Wallace-Hadrill, who may mention it to you. It would be wrong to let him lapse by default and be absorbed totally by the University of Chicago – so far as I know, we pay him nothing.

Yours,  
Isaiah

TO PATRICK NEILL

5 May 1978

Headington House

Dear Patrick,

I enclose two tickets in case it is best to meet at the Coliseum. I had no idea that Byron wrote verse tragedies – I cannot believe that I shall be able to read it before the performance. It would be best if we met in the Coliseum just before – or, if either of us is late, we can go straight to our seats and meet in the interval. I have thought of a rather good new restaurant for supper afterwards.

Yours ever,  
Isaiah

PS Don't forget Momigliano! He is in Chicago, enjoying the limelight there with John Sparrow, at the moment: they are both Alexander White Visiting Professors, and presumably alternate – or perhaps it is a double turn.

SUPPLEMENTARY LETTERS 1975–1997

TO PATRICK NEILL

6 October 1978

Headington House

Dear Patrick,

Thank you very much for asking us to *Don Carlos* – we shall be delighted to come. If they start at 6.30, I feel they are morally obliged to do the ballet as well (which is not likely) – do you know it? It is very rarely performed, but it exists – there is a tremendous description of it by Andrew Porter: it has the same name, which I have now forgotten, as a famous jewel with which it is in some way connected, bought by Richard Burton for Miss Taylor.

Yours,

Isaiah

TO PATRICK NEILL

27 October 1978 [*manuscript*]

All Souls

Dear Patrick,

*'Three things:'* as my late friend, Sir M. Bowra used to say when opening a conversation: in order of importance

1) Would you both come to *L'Africaine* at Cov. Garden on Nov. 25 (Saturday though it is) to the R. Box with us? Where else will you have heard Meyerbeer opulently produced, and not in some lecture hall in London University? *Do* come if you can. As for Don Carlos, I can endure almost anything: Aline possibly not.

2) I wish Kerrigan wrote in a less exalté manner. Is it mere old age that makes me long for a less decorated style? I see no muscle or mental power – am I mistaken?

3) I cannot alas come to the Campbell–Hailsham celebration. I have to dine with a body of scientists who were helpful to Wolfson Coll. during its difficult birth. I do apologise.

Yours,

Isaiah

TO ISAAC STERN

14 December 1978

Headington House

Dear Isaac,

It is terrible not to have spoken to you: you are quite right. It all began with my telephoning your (perfectly authentic) number, and being told by the New York operator that no such number existed: I did this three or four times from my hotel room, with the same result. After this monstrous and inexplicable sabotage, I did telephone a message to the America–Israel Foundation – I did not know what else to do – and duly received a message from, I expect, Vera, giving me the original number. On return I rang it, and received no answer whatever. On the next day there was a voice, which informed me that you were both away and that you would be away for some days – until two or three days, in fact, after we were due to depart. So there it was, and is. But it does not make it less unthinkable. Obviously I ought to have cabled you beforehand, and for failing to do this I do blame myself.

Now, let us turn away from the past and gaze confidently into the future. We shall be there on Sunday 4 February – tickets have been ordered (at least, I hope they have). On the 2nd, we hear an opera called *Evgeny Onegin* at the Royal Opera House, Covent Garden, in what used to be called the Royal Box. If you are in London, and free that evening, come for the whole or part of it as you please – you can be fed during the intervals – so can Vera if she is with you (but you must let me know about this a few days before). March on: on Saturday 3rd I am, alas, blocked by a College meeting which is likely to be stormy and long, but would be free in Oxford in the afternoon, say, after 3 p.m. – so, although I shall not be able to come to London that day, you could perhaps come here? Or could I come to London sometime before your concert on Sunday and have a talk to you? On Friday the 9th we go to Budapest, don't ask why; on Monday we return, and unless totally broken (which in my present condition may in fact happen) we shall, if invited, go to the Rothschild festival (of which not a word has been breathed by the honorands to us so far). On Tuesday 13 February I am due to go to the Oxford Opera Club's performance of *Fidelio*, for attending which there is no possible

SUPPLEMENTARY LETTERS 1975–1997

musical motive; on the 14th we have to [go to] a Covent Garden dinner somewhat connected with a financial appeal – it is plain to me that I cannot do all these things without dramatically shortening my own life, and Aline at a certain point will intervene; so will the doctor. This is just a general impression of what life is like for us at the beginning of February: however, it is plainly necessary, come what may, and I literally mean that, to carve out some time for conversation – I have placed the facts before you, the rest is all yours. Happy New Year.

Yours ever,  
Isaiah

TO PATRICK NEILL

5 January 1979

Headington House

Dear Patrick,

Thank you ever so much for your letter of 19 December. I shall, undeniably, be 70 on June 6 next: Judge Learned Hand correctly observed – ‘One begins by forgetting names, then nouns, then everything’ – I am approaching the last stage at a gallop.

It is very sweet of you to suggest a small gathering on the relevant Wednesday – I do not propose to celebrate it in any way myself – my parents did not believe in birthdays, I was never given any presents on that day, and it is a wonder I did not grow up a grim, alienated misanthrope, a man of few words, and those better unspoken on the one hand, or, on the other, a heartless Don Juan as, according to modern psychology, I should have. So if you would like me to dine on 6 June, I should be happy to do so – if you would rather it was 2 June, I should be equally happy about that. Aline thinks there may be some difficulty about the 9th.

And of course we should be delighted to dine with you on 8 June.

For all these things, I offer you my warmest thanks. I hope we shall meet before that, and if not sooner then at least on the fateful 3 February, with the eyes of the whole world, allegedly, gazing upon us.

Yours,  
Isaiah

[PS] One more thing: will anything of great moment come up at the *stated* College Meeting in *March* (as opposed to Feb.)? I am committed to a ridiculous Eighteenth century gathering about then with various Royal Society profs – and I make superhuman efforts to get back on the 17<sup>th</sup> & I have to go to Princeton *and* Jerusalem but may get out of Princeton: in Jerusalem, alas, I have to start proceedings off in place of Bullock (!) resigned.

I.B.

TO PATRICK NEILL

1 March 1979

Headington House

Dear Patrick,

I see that the timetable you proposed to me is in some jeopardy owing to Hockney's wayward wanderings: never mind. Now, now another date has become perilous – that is, 8 June, when you kindly asked us to dinner. May I beg you for an earlier or a later date for this? The reason, involving a visit across the ocean, is supposed to be shrouded in the darkest secrecy, but you can fairly easily guess the kind of thing it is: it is connected with an academic institution which has done much for me in the past and which demands my presence on 7 June, increasing the obligation that I already feel to it. Consequently, I cannot bring myself to decline on the grounds of a previous engagement, sacred as it is. Will you forgive me? We shall be back a few days later, I with all the weight of my seventy years upon me. I shall tell you what this secret engagement is the very next time we meet: it is only that, given the request for secrecy, I do not feel like putting it down on paper.

I shall be sorry not to be present at the March SGM – the opening of the issue about fifty pounders I regard as very bold: I will not, I promise, write you a letter about that, but if bachelors are not to be automatically re-elected, the notional resistance to women is liable to melt away more rapidly than might have been anticipated.

Yours ever,

Isaiah

TO EDWARD WEEKS

1 January 1980

Headington House

Dear Ted,

Thank you ever so much for your letter of 19 December. To answer your two queries: I never did begin on the project of the history of ideas in Europe<sup>1</sup> – instead, I concentrated on the origins of Romanticism, at least its intellectual origins, which indeed form the material of six Mellon Lectures delivered God knows how many years ago<sup>2</sup> (the only Mellon Lectures never published,<sup>3</sup> of course, because I never delivered the manuscript), and then repeated over the BBC.

In my declining years I shall make one final gallant attempt to write the book founded on these lectures: it is a more interesting and more manageable subject than the history of ideas in the nineteenth century, which is beyond my powers – I should always have known that it was so.

As for that Signet Address, it is perhaps a little hard on Dr Arnold. I do not think I actually mentioned his name, but people may remember otherwise. All I remember doing was saying that the Soviet Union was like a particularly harsh combination of British public school and a theological establishment at their worst; and the purpose of the school magazine was not to give news but to bolster morale – hence the praise for the way ‘our side’ had done, and no dubious items about the doings of the masters or analyses of their characters or general gossip unsuitable for the boys. I think I said that politics in the Soviet Union was rather like sex in schools – often thought about; gone about in a very privy manner; if talked about, leading to punishment, and, if practised and discovered, to immediate expulsion.

The ideology, I thought, was rather like official religion at a school of this type, which was taken for granted by everyone, but the boys who took it really seriously and talked about it were regarded as priggish, ‘pi’ and uncomfortable from the point of view of the other boys, although everybody trooped off to chapel

<sup>1</sup> See E 708.

<sup>2</sup> Fifteen: the lectures were delivered in 1965.

<sup>3</sup> Until 1999.

quite automatically without bothering about what the words of the services meant.

I did say that, terrible as the school was, and given to corporal punishment, both by the masters and the prefects, of a frequent and often arbitrary and unjust kind, boys did not actually *like* to be expelled. If things got too awful they tended to run away, but often slunk back, save for a few brave spirits who rebelled and took pride in defying the authorities, although some of them found the exciting outer world in the end somewhat disappointing.

And I went on like that. I suspect that what got the biggest laugh was the comparison of politics with sex. I may have mentioned Dr Arnold as the founder of the system – Lenin, as it were. I remember that Edmund Wilson in *To the Finland Station* called him ‘the Great Headmaster’ – over-generously, I thought. Stalin was more like Dr Keate of Eton, who beat the boys severely and indiscriminately, and forced them to tip him at the end of term, and if over-tipped by mistake – if a ten-pound note fell from their purses instead of the usual one pound (this is at the very beginning of the nineteenth century) – would put his heavy foot on it, and glare at the boy until he went away.

Do come and see us: we are very unaltered, and I am sure you are.

Yours ever,  
Isaiah

TO HENRY HARDY

9 June 1980

Headington House

Dear Henry,

Thank you for your letters of 30 May and 4 June, and copy of your letter to Mr Meeuws.<sup>4</sup> Let me answer them in order. The *Pelican* has arrived but I have not had time to read it yet. H. G. Nicholas has indeed finished – some people work fast. Do let Segal have the galleys, as you suggest. Thank you for the reviews of Herzen and for your kind words about the sales conference – I am glad that others enjoyed it more than I did.

<sup>4</sup> All three letters missing.

Now, about your letter of 4 June. Let me begin by saying that I fully understand why you should think that your revision of my ‘footnote’ on the Guest from the Future is wholly reasonable – it would have been so but for the peculiar circumstances which surround the text of AA’s poems. I am, of course, grateful to you for following Pat’s suggestion and letting me look at the relevant text.

Your typed version of my footnote, as sent to the printer, seems to me *prima facie* correct, although I have not checked it word for word. I should still prefer it to be a footnote, long as it is, in type however small, but if you think an appendix is indispensable, so be it.

The transliteration is whatever you wish it to be; the only thing I would like to insist on is that you keep – in this article only – the apostrophe for the soft sign: it is so concerned with words in Russian – far more than *Russian Thinkers* – that I should like to make the transliteration as exact as possible, since there is in it material for scholars, as there is not in the other essays. But in the case of names well known abroad, perhaps the Western version has better be used, e.g. Nijinsky, not Nizhinski.

Now, the longer v. the shorter version of the footnote. Although I have based myself on the Zhirmunsky edition as being more authoritative, it is quite difficult to procure – it exists in libraries, of course, but scholars can no longer obtain it from the Soviet Union, as everything there goes out of print rapidly, particularly editions of not too well approved-of writers; consequently, I notice that the great majority of those who write about AA use Struve–Filippov. This alone is a reason for the cross-references. Moreover, there are scholars who do not read Russian who write about AA, whom they read in translation only, and these for the most part, I tend to think, refer to S–F only. In addition to this, Struve is acutely sensitive about Akhmatova texts, writes me letters about all this, and would be bitterly offended if I ignored his edition in these references, and this would to some degree affect reviewers, to whom he would certainly – and from his own point of view justifiably – vehemently complain. The last thing I wish to do is to fall out with him, as he has been most considerate in letting me know all kinds of things in connection with his editions of Russian poets. And another point: neither edition, whatever it may claim, is complete; Z leaves out,

honourably, the pro-Stalin poems extorted from her in an effort to save her son, and her translations of non-Russian poets; S–F includes the Stalin poems and omits the poems which ‘I cannot find’. Consequently the omission of either edition is wrong in principle.

This is complicated further by the following. An American correspondent quotes to me certain lines which he says are from ‘Epilogue’ in *Poem without a Hero* (1946–56), beginning with the words *Za tebya zaplatila Chistoganom*, which clearly refer to my visit: I cannot find these words in Z, and propose to look for them in S–F, vol. 2, which I do not possess (it seems to have been stolen by someone) – if I can find these lines, they should certainly be referred to in my S–F references.

I accept your point about not saying ‘I cannot find’ this or that ‘in S–F’ – as you say, it is either there or not there – but one cannot be certain that it is not tucked away somewhere. I therefore deem it best simply to omit references to Z or S–F, as the case may be, where lines seem to be missing, and let the reader infer their absence from the relevant edition – I would rather not say ‘not in Z’ or ‘not in S–F’, for I cannot be certain; although if you want me to do that I am ready to write to Struve and ask him whether indeed the missing texts are truly missing from his edition.

There is also this further point. The order of the stanzas, poems, etc. in Z and S–F is sometimes different – again, if scholars wish to consult the original texts, Z alone is not sufficient. The differences in order are not arbitrary: Z and S–F grouped the poems as they did for various reasons of their own – relevance, date, AA’s instructions, order in original publication, etc. – and this makes a difference to their interpretation, i.e. to scholars seeking to unravel some of the truly dark mysteries of her poems (she admits that she uses a triple bottom in her box).

For all these reasons the cross-references must be kept.

As to the titles of the poems, their names in English and Russian, their date and place of composition, page refs to the editorial notes, etc., these must be kept because Z is not easily available and because the translations are the basis of much writing about AA. I don’t want to take a haughty line whereby only those who read Russian can be regarded as interested in what I have to say. Hence the need for all these pedantic details. I don’t think we are obstructing rather than aiding researches of scholars by the

fullness of references – no scholar known to me has ever complained of this in any field of knowledge (reviewers may do so, but to hell with them – in this connection).

I am truly grateful to you for realising that I might disagree with you on this issue. I must now go and try to trace the new lines which my American correspondent has sent me: I shall ask Pat to ask you where vol. 2 of the second edition of S–F is most easily accessible. If I cannot find the lines even there, I shall have to write to Chicago – do bear with me over this, the lines are worth recording if only for completeness’ sake – it would be absurd to make such a pile of references and then omit material lines.

Now with regard to your specific points:

1. *Nebet* is the title of poems 451–6, that is quite clear in Z, I have not bothered to look at S–F. It is the title of a cycle – if we quote such titles elsewhere, why not here?

2. ‘The White Hall’: you are right, it is indeed the title of a single stanza, to her of immense importance as it is a historic room in the Sheremetev Palace, next door to her own room there. It should therefore be referred to as the title of the italicised verses in question, as you have done in the version sent to the printer.

3. You are quite right about Z pp. 412–13: this is my mistake, misplaced by me. The reference should read ‘(Z pp. 235-7, notes pp. 412–13 and 488)’.

4. I cannot answer this until I have seen S–F vol. 2 – I may well be wrong again.

Could you add to the list of references to ‘me’ the following: ‘“Prichitaniye”, 555, 27 January 1946 (Z p. 296)’ – and I may be able to give you an S–F reference after seeing vol. 2.

Yours,

Isaiah

TO KARL MILLER

12 October 1981

Headington House

Dear Karl,

I enclose this vast counter-indictment,<sup>5</sup> probably longer than the original article; but you did tell me not to worry about length (dangerous advice to someone like me), so I hope you publish it. I recommend as a title for it ‘Aarsleff and Vico’ (and not vice versa), and that it be printed below Aarsleff’s piece – I do hope it can go in the same issue.

I realise that these academic duels are a source of pure entertainment to the reader, who doesn’t much care where the truth lies, and usually has no idea of what it is all about, but enjoys the spectacle of academics hitting out at each other. I do not, I admit, enjoy being put in this position, but in view of the violent exasperation, indeed, indignation with which Aarsleff has written, I thought it would be cowardly to say nothing: so I have probably said too much. I really do not know what can have come over him – what annoys me most is the snide, not to say sugary, letter with which he accompanied the copy he sent to me, telling me how pleasant it had been and would be again to see me, talk to me, etc. I wonder why he did not send this piece to, say, the *Journal of the History of Ideas* or *History and Theory* or the *Modern Languages* [sc. *Language*] *Review* or the *History of European Ideas*: I suspect that he feels he is in a library pegging away, adding brick to brick in defence of genuine learning, while I get away with it with windy generalisations and rhetoric in lecture rooms, a charlatan but a jack-of-all-trades and clearly master of none that he knows about – yet I pretend to produce monographs with pretensions of scholarship. All this must have been building up for months and perhaps years, and perhaps he wants the most public possible platform for his cry of injustice.

<sup>5</sup> Reply to Hans Aarsleff, ‘Vico and Berlin’, *London Review of Books*, 5–18 November 1981, 7–8, <<http://bit.ly/2XWBh1Q>> (Aarsleff 6–7, <<http://bit.ly/2PG5dfN>>); cf. letter, *ibid.*, 3–16 June 1982, 5, <<http://bit.ly/2J3AGYc>>. Hans Christian Aarsleff (b. 1925), Danish-born US scholar of linguistics; prof. of linguistics, dept of English, Princeton.

SUPPLEMENTARY LETTERS 1975–1997

You may think all this rather exaggerated, but I suspect – and so does Stuart – that it is true.

Will you be sending me proofs? Aarsleff has kindly informed me that he has corrected his.

May I tell you how much I enjoy reading and how greatly I admire the *LRB* whenever I get to see it (I am a subscriber, but it seems to arrive a little irregularly\* – there is nothing you can do about that, I am sure – I borrow Stuart's copies)?

Yours ever,  
Isaiah

\*As Prof A thinks I exaggerate: the last one has just arrived, so let me modify this

IB

PS Could you be kind enough to see that I am sent, say, six copies of the issue in which Aarsleff's piece and my rejoinder appear? – for which, of course, I shall pay.

TO MARJORIE PLAMENATZ

16 November 1981

Headington House

Dear Mrs Plamenatz,

It is my turn to apologise to you for an unconscionable delay in replying. I am terribly sorry you had an accident – I do hope you are better: I was always getting messages from the late Shostakovich, the Russian composer, telling me to walk carefully, not to trip over branches or let my foot slip over kerbs – what can I do but press this excellent advice on you too? Save that it is too late.

Thank you ever so much for all those details about John – it is exactly what I needed. I am not sure whether to spell his parents' names in the Serbian or English way, but it does not matter. I shall get to work on the piece now and send you a copy before I send it to the Editors of the *DNB*. Thank you ever so much.

Yours sincerely,  
Isaiah Berlin

SUPPLEMENTARY LETTERS 1975–1997

PS On Marivaux: I don't remember a review, but there [may] well have been an unsigned one in the old, unsigned days of the TLS; but I do remember a letter defending him against some critic, and a very good letter it was too. I feel sure, as you do, that he must have written on Marivaux and Beaumarchais – I think I said something about his taste in French eighteenth-century literature in All Souls Chapel, but I shall say it again.

TO KARL MILLER

7 December 1981

Headington House

Dear Karl,

Thank you ever so much for sending me £125, but I cannot in conscience accept it: all I did was to defend myself against a somewhat peculiar piece by my Danish acquaintance, which, had it appeared in the form of a letter, you would not have been obliged to pay for – or, indeed, publish. It was a favour to me that you printed so long a piece, even if, according to some, this might have helped to sell an extra copy or two of the *Review*. So how can I accept payment? Adding reward to favour? I return the cheque. If, of course, you think this over-punctilious, or even silly, I should be glad to have it back, rather than incur the mildest raising of your eyebrow.

Yours ever,  
Isaiah

TO MARJORIE PLAMENATZ

11 January 1982

Headington House

Dear Mrs Plamenatz,

Thank you ever so much for your letter of 5 January, which is most helpful – I am very grateful to you. I will certainly put in something about John's love of French literature. I am deeply moved [that] you understand my feelings for him, and that he reciprocated them, as I had always hoped: he never spoke about such things, as you may well imagine, which was of a piece with his dignified and reticent nature.

SUPPLEMENTARY LETTERS 1975–1997

Of course I shall send you a copy of the completed piece.  
Yours sincerely,  
Isaiah Berlin

PS I shall do my best to identify Northholt Park.

TO MICHAEL MORAN<sup>6</sup>

7 July 1982

The Athenaeum; as from Headington House

Dear Moran

Did I ever reply – or in any way acknowledge – the two *admirable* pieces on Hegel in the Listener or Nietzsche? Both seem to me excellent: but the one on Hegel particularly original and illuminating: the hypnotic nature of Hegel's style (*what* did the Russian intelligentsia of the 1840ies e.g. my hero Herzen mean by the “iron laws of Hegel's inexorable logic”?) and his attraction to Mallarmé, or for that matter to some sincere “God-seekers” in our time? I apologize if I did not reply: & shd love to see you (& read you) again. I am off to Italy in a week or so, but back in late September. Will you be in London or Oxford in October, November, December? I shd be grateful if you wd let me know

yrs sincerely  
Isaiah Berlin

TO VANESSA THOMAS

27 October 1982 [*manuscript card*]

as from Headington House

I am still in a slight daze after that excellent party<sup>7</sup> (Tony Powell said to me, while being driven by Tony Quinton “how long, do you think, will it take us to digest this evening's experience?”)

<sup>6</sup> (John) Michael Patrick Moran (1935–2016), assistant lecturer in philosophy, Keele, 1960–2; lecturer in philosophy and intellectual history, Sussex (where IB attended some of his lectures), 1962–88, professorial fellow, Eastern Mediterranean, Cyprus, 1989–93; academic adviser to Rauf Denktaş, President, Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus, 1991–2000.

<sup>7</sup> A dinner party given by Margaret Thatcher.

which I enjoyed *very* much indeed. I am grateful to you for inviting me. When next we meet I *must* quote to you (if I haven't already) Philip Larkin's words about the Berlin Wall. I think Jack Plumb was more himself than ever – he really is a character from the stage: Sheridan, I think. Thank you again ever so much.

Isaiah

\*TO KARL MILLER<sup>8</sup>

24 February 1984

Headington House

Dear Karl,

I *have* had a bad time with the *London Review*! First Aarsleff<sup>9</sup> (I did not much like Nigel Hamilton's wholly contemptuous review of 'my' Washington dispatches,<sup>10</sup> but I thought that what he said was quite just); then a nasty piece about the domination of America by the 'Elders of Zion', with their mysterious, unlimited power, by the fanatical Ian Gilmour,<sup>11</sup> who obviously really does

<sup>8</sup> Karl Fergus Connor Miller (b. 1931), British literary editor, critic and writer; Lord Northcliffe Prof. of Modern English Literature, UCL, 1974–92; founding editor, *London Review of Books*, 1979–88, co-editor 1988–92.

<sup>9</sup> See **above**.

<sup>10</sup> (Charles) Nigel Hamilton (b. 1944), British-born US biographer; in 'In the Field', LRB, 5 November 1981, 16–17, a review of H. G. Nicholas (ed.), *Washington Despatches 1941–45: Weekly Political Reports from the British Embassy* (London/Chicago, 1981) and 5 other books, he asks: 'Why should this gifted man have failed to deliver something more rewarding? The answer is, of course, censorship. Not imposed – though that, too, possibly – so much as self-imposed' (16).

<sup>11</sup> Ian Hedworth John Little Gilmour (1926–2007), 2nd Bt 1977, life peer 1992; Conservative MP 1962–92; secretary of state for defence 1974, lord privy seal 1979–81. Gilmour was disturbed by Eden's Suez venture 1956 and later 'was to be accused of over-zealousness in his Arab sympathies'; he had been deeply affected by a visit to the defeated Arab side after the Six Day War, and 'having seen at first hand the treatment of the Palestinians, [...] made theirs a lifelong cause' ('Lord Gilmour of Craigmillar', obituary, *Times*, 24 September 2007, 60a–e at 60a, 60b). The 'nasty piece' is 'America and Israel', LRB, 18 February to 3 March 1982, 7–9.

think there is a conspiracy and that American senators are manipulated – even in States like Idaho, where there are virtually no Jews – by horrid methods that he only mysteriously hints at, but I know what he means, and it won't do. **On the same page there was an even more obsessed piece by Malise Ruthven, who really must be a little crazy, in which he declares that the famous Kahan Report on the massacres in the Lebanon – which had an enormous impact on Israel – was nothing but a cynical whitewash which could not take in a cat. These are surely the outpourings of pure fanaticism.** The present government of Israel is, in my view, wicked and odious, but that is not the point. Your Middle Eastern experts seem to me possessed – and have been for some time – by a hatred beyond reason of the entire horrid enterprise of Zionism, of the springs and nature of which they show not the slightest knowledge, as if it was something frightful, exploding out of nothing.

Stuart telephoned me the other day and asked me if I had seen the latest copy of the LRB. I said I had not. He begged me not to look at it, since the article by Edward Said<sup>12</sup> would surely cause me to cancel my subscription, and would send me into a sharp decline. I did, of course, read it at once. Stuart's disapproval was concerned not too much with the first part of the article, which, we agreed, was routine PLO stuff, only more repetitive, pretentious and confused than the shorter and clearer statements by Arafat, but with the encomium to Chomsky.<sup>13</sup> I know Chomsky quite well, and like him – he is a man of brilliant gifts and great personal charm; but his polemical writings are not exactly notable for

<sup>12</sup> 'Permission to Narrate' (LRB, 16 February 1984, 13–17), a review of 8 books on the Palestinians, including Noam Chomsky, *The Fateful Triangle: Israel, the United States and the Palestinians* (Boston/London, 1983).

<sup>13</sup> After expressing reservations about Chomsky's approach – 'his work is not only deeply and unacceptably pessimistic: it is also a work not critical and reflective enough about its own premisses' – Said writes: 'These criticisms cannot be made at all lightly, or without acknowledging the unparalleled energy and honesty of his achievement. There is something deeply moving about a mind of such noble ideals repeatedly stirred on behalf of human suffering and injustice. One thinks here of Voltaire, of Benda, or Russell, although more than any of them, Chomsky commands what he calls "reality" – facts – over a breathtaking range' (16).

scruple or unswerving adherence to the truth. This is true about all his writings, including linguistics,<sup>14</sup> but he lost all political credibility after he maintained that the reports of massacres by the Khmer Rouge were largely inventions of the American media,<sup>15</sup> and after a piece by him<sup>16</sup> was published, with his permission, as an introduction to a book by a man called Faurisson,<sup>17</sup> who said that the Holocaust had never occurred, but was a Zionist invention. **(He said that this was intended only to support the right to free speech, but it went too far even for his followers.) The tribute to Chomsky's integrity irritated Stuart because of its patent falsity.** One cannot, of course, blame any Palestinian Arab for hating Israel, whatever he writes; but so far as serious students of the subject are concerned, Said was laid out once and for all by

<sup>14</sup> An unfair comment: Chomsky's achievement in linguistics is widely recognised.

<sup>15</sup> In his writings on Cambodia during and directly after the period of Khmer Rouge rule – e.g. his article with Edward S. Herman, 'Distortions at Fourth Hand', *Nation*, 6 June 1977, 789–94; and *After the Cataclysm: Postwar Indochina and the Reconstruction of Imperial Ideology* [*The Political Economy of Human Rights* ii] (Boston, 1979) – Chomsky kept an open mind on the total number of Cambodians murdered by the Pol Pot regime, but viewed with scepticism Western media reports depicting state-sponsored genocide, later proved to have occurred. Steven Lukes's highly critical commentary on this position – 'Chomsky's Betrayal of the Truths', *THES*, 7 November 1980, 31 – met with several emphatic rebuttals (e.g. Laura J. Summers, letter to the editor, 19 December 1980, 22), and there was later a direct exchange between Chomsky and Lukes (Chomsky, 'The Truth about Indochina', 6 March 1981, 13; Lukes, 'Suspending Chomsky's Disbeliefs', 27 March 1981, 31; Chomsky, 'The Dispute about Atrocities in Kampuchea', letter, 12 June 1981, 35).

<sup>16</sup> 'Some Elementary Comments on the Rights of Freedom of Expression', published in French translation as a preface to Robert Faurisson, *Mémoire en défense, contre ceux qui m'accusent de falsifier l'histoire: la question des chambres à gaz* (Paris, [1980]), and in English in Noam Chomsky, *Chomsky on Democracy and Education*, ed. C. P. Otero (NY and London, 2003).

<sup>17</sup> Robert Faurisson (b. 1929), British-born French academic and Holocaust denier; taught French literature, Lyon II, 1973–91; deprived of his professorship in 1991 after conviction under the 1990 Gayssot Act, which makes it an offence to deny officially recognised crimes against humanity.

the formidable Bernard Lewis,<sup>18</sup> in an article in the NYRB:<sup>19</sup> his Harold-Bloom-hypnotised critical essays seem to me, in their own silly way, no better (though I expect Frank K[ermode]<sup>20</sup> might defend them on principle).

What I really want to ask you is: Must you use only zealots in writing about the Middle East? If you employ members of the Council of the PLO or CAABU,<sup>21</sup> should not this be balanced with pieces by some ghastly ex-member of the Irgun<sup>22</sup> or the Stern Gang?<sup>23</sup> It is clear that nobody can be neutral about either the Soviet Union or Israel. Nevertheless, there are degrees of rabidity – there must be more temperate people who can write. In Israel itself there exists a movement called ‘Peace Now’, which is entirely decent and very moderate – prepared to talk to the PLO, give up the West Bank, etc. They organised huge meetings to protest about the invasion of Lebanon, the treatment of Arabs, and everything that goes with it (one of its members, the novelist Amos Oz,<sup>24</sup> who is a genuinely brave protester, is one of the people whom Chomsky – approved by Said – regards as a greater menace than the nationalist fanatics).<sup>25</sup> These people are not favoured by the

<sup>18</sup> Bernard Lewis (b. 1916), Cleveland E. Dodge Prof. of Near Eastern Studies, Princeton, 1974–86; director, Annenberg Research Institute, Philadelphia, 1986–90.

<sup>19</sup> ‘The Question of Orientalism’, NYRB, 24 June 1982, 49–56.

<sup>20</sup> (John) Frank Kermode (1919–2010) Kt 1991; Lord Northcliffe Prof. of Modern English Literature, UCL, 1967–74; King Edward VII Prof. of English Literature, Cambridge, 1974–82, and fellow, King’s, 1974–87.

<sup>21</sup> Council for Arab–British Understanding.

<sup>22</sup> Irgun Ts’vai L’umi, or Etsel (National Military Organization), right-wing Zionist paramilitary group founded 1931.

<sup>23</sup> Lohamei Herut Israel, or Lehi (Fighters for the Freedom of Israel), founded by Avraham Stern 1940 after a split in the Irgun, and known as the ‘Stern Gang’.

<sup>24</sup> Amos Oz (b. 1939) né Klausner, Israeli writer, novelist, journalist and intellectual; prof. of Hebrew literature, Ben-Gurion University of the Negev, 1987–2005; since 1967 a prominent advocate of a 2-state solution to the Israel–Palestine conflict, and one of the founders of the Peace Now movement 1978.

<sup>25</sup> ‘The truth of the matter is that Amos Oz is no more an advocate for peace than the mainstream of the PLO, maybe less so’: Chomsky interviewed in May 1988 by Burton Levine, *Shmate: A Journal of Progressive*

government, nor even by sections of the Israel Labour Party, for whom they go too far, but I admire them greatly. Can't there be something by, or at least about, them? (there are no other moderates in the Middle East) – they write calmly and well. **I wish I could offer you something – even if you declined it – but I am no expert.**

But why am I going on like this? What right have I to write a letter simply to say that I keep having an awful time with your otherwise excellent periodical? – **my** unfortunate experience is probably unique. It is only that I wanted to get all this stuff off my chest, but there is no reason why you should be subjected to a tirade. Please forgive me. I should have preferred to *say* this to you, but we see each other, sadly, so seldom, that the only way of dealing with this is in writing. No doubt the Edwards – Said, Mortimer etc. – would say that my letter is precisely the kind of attempt at censorship that the wicked Zionists are so good at. **The bitterly committed seem to me** impervious to argument. Anyway, Stuart encouraged me to write to you, else I don't think I should have. *Dixi, et salvavi animam meam.*

Yours, in unbroken friendship **<I actually said 'affection', but this will do as well,**

**Isaiah**

TO MARY-KAY WILMERS<sup>26</sup>

30 March 1984

Headington House

Dear Mary Kay –

Thank you ever so much for your letter. David Vital's<sup>27</sup> address is 42 Kendal Steps, St. George's Fields, W.2. (Tel: 723.8330). I met

*Jewish Thought*, 20 (Summer 1988), 24–32: see <http://www.chomsky.info/interviews/198805--.htm>.

<sup>26</sup> Mary-Kay Wilmers (b. 1938), co-founder with Karl Miller of the *London Review of Books* 1979, later co-editor (1989) and editor (1992).

<sup>27</sup> David Vital (b. 1927) né David Vital Grossman, son of the Zionist leader and journalist Meir Grossman; Israeli political scientist and historian of post-Emancipation Jewry; in government service 1954–66 (Foreign Ministry and Intelligence Service) before returning to academia;

him in the British Museum Reading Room: yesterday: he looks on me as a hopeless dove: I see him as a rigid, committed hawk. He is an able man – his history of Zionism is a serious & very solid book, the best on its subject – but he is too nationalistic for me: and too hawkish and too touchy and too contemptuous of the liberal, the “soft”, those lacking in national pride & resolution

Believe me, there *are* less furious people than Gilmour<sup>28</sup> or Said<sup>29</sup> or Vital (though V. is not as far gone as the other two). Still one should not, I suppose, look a gift horse so much in the mouth – & it *is* a gift – & I *am* grateful for this concession to balance – Likud v. Arabomania.

I enclose a fragment of a letter<sup>30</sup> from a *New Republic* journalist – a gifted youth called Wieseltier<sup>31</sup> (who I suspect has written a

Nahum Goldmann Prof. of Diplomacy, Tel Aviv, 1977–95. An undergraduate pupil of IB's at New College, Vital undertook his 3-vol. history of the Zionist movement (Oxford, 1975, 1982, 1987) at IB's pressing.

<sup>28</sup> Ian Hedworth John Little Gilmour (1926–2007), 2nd Bt 1977, life peer 1992; Conservative MP 1962–92; secretary of state for defence 1974, lord privy seal 1979–81. Gilmour was disturbed by Eden's Suez venture 1956 and later 'was to be accused of over-zealousness in his Arab sympathies'; he had been deeply affected by a visit to the defeated Arab side after the Six Day War, and 'having seen at first hand the treatment of the Palestinians, [...] made theirs a lifelong cause' ('Lord Gilmour of Craigmillar', obituary, *Times*, 24 September 2007, 60a–e at 60a, 60b). The 'nasty piece' is 'America and Israel', LRB, 18 February to 3 March 1982, 7–9.

<sup>29</sup> Edward Wadie Said (1935–2003), Jerusalem-born Palestinian American literary critic and political activist, internationally known for his advocacy of the rights of the Palestinian people; joined faculty, Columbia, 1963, full prof. 1970, later University Prof. (1992–2003).

<sup>30</sup> 'You saw Prof Said's piece in the London Review, I presume. Nasty masquerading as noble, like all his work. But can you explain why that journal has become so intensely hospitable to anti-Zionism? It is its most respectable regular address.'

<sup>31</sup> Leon Sol Wieseltier (b. 1952), Jewish-American author, critic and public intellectual; literary editor, *New Republic*, 1983–2014; later, author of *Kaddish* (NY, 1998) and, since 2015, Isaiah Berlin Senior Fellow, Brookings Institution, Washington. A close bond with IB began when LW was a BLitt student at Balliol, 1974–6.

SUPPLEMENTARY LETTERS 1975–1997

horrid but funny letter to Richard Wollheim<sup>32</sup> who has suddenly begun to adore America, I hear) – you may think the New Republic too pro-Zionist. Anyway I enclose it just to show that I am not quite alone in my plaintive cry. Love to Karl:<sup>33</sup> & indeed to yourself too. It was very nice of you to write to me.

yrs ever  
Isaiah

TO MICHAEL MORAN

10 October 1986

Headington House

Dear Moran,

I am perfectly willing to write to Christ Church about you, but I must say that you are unfortunately right: I doubt if you would get even as far as a short list. Jobs in philosophy now are so few, and the number of main-line philosophers with good degrees, in Oxford alone, is so great, and the pressure so immense, that I think that they are in any case likely to choose somebody whom they think will teach the main topics in the present Oxford philosophy curriculum. Of course, Montefiore, Gardiner etc. are wider in their outlook than the Oxford analysts, but ours is still a fringe subject here, and I therefore doubt if Christ Church could think it could afford it. Still, I will do as you say – but you really must pitch your hopes rather low. I sincerely hope that I am mistaken.

Yours sincerely,  
Isaiah Berlin

PS Thank you ever so much for sending me the review – I am now very old and suffer from rapidly advancing amnesia – I am not

<sup>32</sup> Richard Arthur Wollheim (1923–2003), FBA 1972, lecturer in philosophy, UCL, 1951–60, reader 1960–3, Grote Prof. of Philosophy of Mind and Logic 1963–82; prof. of philosophy, Columbia 1982–5, later Berkeley (1985–2002).

<sup>33</sup> Karl Fergus Connor Miller (1931–2014), British literary editor, critic and writer; Lord Northcliffe Prof. of Modern English Literature, UCL, 1974–92; founding editor, *London Review of Books*, 1979–89, later co-editor (1989–92).

comforted by the newest discoveries in physiology/ psychology which say that memory is not an accumulation of data stored by the neurones, but a far more subjective imposition of patterns upon the past, each somewhat different in each individual case from others; and therefore dependent on all kinds of uninvestigated personal socio-psychological factors. Whatever the cause, the effect is gloomy. I re-read your review with, I fear, somewhat complacent pleasure, and feel renewed gratitude for being understood so well. I also read your two other reviews with great amusement and pleasure – I am so glad you despise Derrida – for all that he is one of Montefiore’s close friends, or so he says. I think he is a genuine old-fashioned charlatan, rather a clever man as only such can be. Also your remarks about Bamborough must be right for all I know him. And as for Lewis ... Anyway, I read it with pleasure and profit. And so I did your kind review of Hinchman – I feel so ignorant of the inner lanes [sc. lines?] of Hegel’s thought that I thought perhaps I would read it, taking your advice to heart, and ignore his discipleship to Hegel, just to find out what Hegel actually said, or even meant. Anyway, thank you very much for all this.

I.B

TO JOHN RAWLS

31 August 1988

Headington House

Dear Jack,

Thank you ever so much for ‘The Idea of an Overlapping Consensus’. I read it with the greatest pleasure, and as always with deep and constant admiration. As you may imagine, your defence of pluralism speaks to both my heart and my mind – it is to me, as it is to you, ‘a permanent feature of [the] public culture of modern democracies’. And I share your apprehensions about the effects of ‘general and comprehensive doctrines’ which lead to oppression – and can do even in the civilised forms of the philosophies of Kant and Mill. And of course I think in the end everything depends on an acceptance of certain ‘fundamental intuitive ideas latent in the political culture’ of a given society, what you call the democratic tradition.

My only doubts arise about the degree of your optimism in the possibility of offering your views, with which I totally agree, as a permanent basis within which disagreements can be resolved. I fully realise that you are aware of the strength of, let us say, people's religious convictions, which lead to fanaticism – to the view, let us say, that since the salvation of souls is after all the most important issue that can be, how can you compromise it, or the attempt to save souls if need be by coercive means, simply in order to preserve democracy, social peace, fairness, justice and the like? I have no doubt that certain social evils are so great – let us say, e.g., slavery or racial hatreds – that violence is justified in suppressing these things, even if it undermines the basis of social consensus, and so on. But I believe, with you, that so long as what you call *very great virtues* (p. 17) prevail, our proposals can and should be regarded as right, and supported. As you may imagine, Sections VII and VIII are entirely admirable, I agree with every syllable of them. The only thing that worries me, as I said above, is that you are, I think, thinking mainly of Anglo-Saxon societies, in which there really is a genuine democratic condition [sc. tradition?] since the late seventeenth century, in which all that you say is both applicable and feasible. But so much of the world has grown up on ideas, values and principles so different from these that the attempt to offer them your view would I think in places be regarded as unintelligible. Which plunges me into deep pessimism – I think of Israel, for example, with which I feel an emotional connection – and the fanaticism there is such that the prevalence of your ideas and mine seems unlikely to prevail in the immediately foreseeable future. Still, the truth! Let it go forward! We can but say what we believe and hope for agreement, if not now then in some enlightened future. Thank you ever so much again for sending me your piece.

Yours ever, (with *warmest* good wishes)

Isaiah

PS I ought to add that your reference to my views on p. 7, n. 13, seems to me entirely correct – I am flattered that you should have mentioned it, and believe that your last line, in which you suppose that the general scheme you outline might coincide with my moral-political *Weltanschauung*, might well be right. I sincerely hope so! But I think I trust your intuitive certainties more than my own. I

SUPPLEMENTARY LETTERS 1975–1997

hope the conference in Italy in June went agreeably for you. I wish I could have come while we were here, it would have been marvellous to see you both.

TO ROBERT SILVERS

1 May 1989

Headington House

Dear Bob,

[...] The courting of me by what my friend Jock Balfour used to call 'the Soviet Onion' continues. The most moving letters from Moscow, begging me to come to their Akhmatova celebrations, in Moscow, Leningrad, Pushkin (Tsarskoe Selo), Kiev and, for some reason, Tver. But I won't go, it would be exhausting and pointless and I have said all I could say. Nevertheless, I did submit to the Soviet TV, which interviewed me about Akhmatova, Pasternak etc., and was assured that fifty million Soviet citizens would gaze, though not for more than, say, two minutes, on my unforgettable features. Elena C[hukovskaya] told me that when Brodsky was ill in hospital, pale, silent, someone came and told him that Yevtushenko was against collective farms; he said 'If he's against, I am for' – he never disappoints one – please give him my love. [...]

Yours ever,  
Isaiah

TO ROBERT SILVERS

11 October 1989

Headington House

[...]

PS You will be interested to hear – I get this information from the wicked Worsthorne – that Maurice Cowling's last volume (you remember that major history of the evolution of England, in which all ills are ascribed to the anti-Christianity of the nineteenth century and the erosion of the Church as the heart of all that is good in England?) there will be a chapter devoted apparently exclusively to me as the instigator of the war against Hitler – which in his opinion was against the interests of the United Kingdom –

which would have done far, far better to have remained neutral, would not have lost the Empire or its resources, etc., and for which I must be in some sense if not the literal at any rate the symbolic culprit, inasmuch as I typify the ghastly, soft, atheistical, liberal, intellectual establishment, which betrayed England into a course of action deeply inimical to its true interests. I cannot wait. Do you think Noel will go to battle again? Or Bernard? Cowling is at Columbia at the moment – in the Religious Affairs Dept – arranged by Cannadine – all this from his ex-Master, H. T. Roper.

TO SHIRLEY LETWIN

24 November 1991 [*transcript by SL of lost original*]

[Headington House?]

Dear Shirley,

Thank you for sending me *Rationalism and Politics*.<sup>34</sup> I confess that I have never read a word of his. I know that his way of thinking is in some ways similar to mine, but ...

I first met him at lunch at Nuffield. It was a friendly lunch. But when I said that he should write something on Hegel, he seemed to resent it and then things went badly. When I came to the LSE to give a lecture, he gave a very bitchy introduction, which upset me very much, and ruined the lecture.<sup>35</sup> But when the lecture was published (on historicism)<sup>36</sup> there were no criticisms of Oakeshott. He told people that he had beaten me for the chair at LSE, for which I never applied. So things did not go well.

I met him again some twenty years later. He was very affectionate, in a tipsy sort of way. He asked me who is the greatest French thinker of the twentieth century and brushed aside

<sup>34</sup> Michael Oakeshott, *Rationalism and Politics and Other Essays* (London, 1962; 2nd ed., Indianapolis, 1991). Presumably SL gave IB the new (expanded) edition.

<sup>35</sup> The handwritten text on which Oakeshott based his introduction survives. The passage IB refers to is this: 'Listening to him you may be tempted to think that you are in the presence of one of the great intellectual *virtuosos* of our time, a Paganini of ideas' [LSE Archives, Oakeshott 1/3].

<sup>36</sup> *Historical Inevitability* (London, 1954). The lecture was delivered on 12 May 1953.

my suggestions – [the answer was] Paul Valéry – which upset me, but not gravely.

Thanks to your present I shall now set sail on this boundless sea without seeking harbour. In your brilliant essay on Hume and Oakeshott, I think you exaggerated his quality. I adore Hume. Perhaps I will now come to adore Oakeshott.

Yours,  
Isaiah

TO HARRY JAFFA

24 May 1992 [*carbon*]<sup>37</sup>

Headington House

Dear Professor Jaffa,

Thank you for your letter of 18 May and also for the copy of your letter of 13 May to the *New York Review of Books*. I am glad that my estimate of Leo Strauss is more or less similar to your own, and not to [that of] Strauss's principal detractors.

I think that my estimate, both of his character and of his writings, is probably more balanced and well-grounded than that of those who detest his doctrines. Nevertheless, I must confess that I do not accept his views either, in part or in whole.

I must also thank you for sending me a copy of his essay on relativism, critical of my views. I had no idea that this essay had appeared – all I knew is that someone, perhaps the late Professor Momigliano, told me something of the sort was in the making. It is clear to me that Strauss radically misunderstood my position. I am not and never have been either a relativist or, in his sense of the word, a historicist (although the latter could be disputed – but not by me). It is true that, like him, I believe that there are ultimate human values which have been accepted by men. I say (in the quotation give by Strauss) that they are 'accepted so widely, and [are] grounded so deeply in the actual nature of men as they have developed through history, as to be, by now, an essential part of what we mean by being a normal human being' [L 210]. And I speak of absolute stands [*ibid.*]. The point on which I differ from Strauss is that of course, being an empiricist, I do not believe in

<sup>37</sup> There are some oddities in this letter which may have been corrected in the top copy. However, this never reached Jaffa, so we shall never know.

any a priori basis for these beliefs – what I mean by ‘absolute’, ‘final’ beliefs, defending them if need be with one’s life, etc., are beliefs grounded in values which have been believed so widely for so long in so many human communities that they can be regarded as natural to human beings. This does not mean that they could not in principle alter, although this, in view of the past, seems very unlikely; and if they do, we cannot, being as we are, anticipate what they could possibly be. The difference between Strauss and me is simply between the absolute, a priori basis in which he believes, and the virtually, if only virtually, universal basis on which I ground these values. But, in addition to these, I was speaking of values which are products of their own time and culture, and to those who belong to these cultures these can be equally sacred, e.g. my concept of negative liberty, about which there is not much in the ancient world; or the value of sincerity, which I do not think can be found much, if at all, before the end of the seventeenth century; the rights of the individual, which *pave* Pericles’ speech in Thucydides and the Latin *iura*, which does not mean ‘rights’, can be found at the very earliest perhaps in Occam and as a result of nominalism; or for that matter, and related to the last, negative liberty. These are indeed products of a historical phase and can for the most part be accounted for as elements in total constellations of values which characterise ages, cultures, periods. Strauss will have none of this. He believes that there are eternal values, valid for all men at all times – *quod semper, quod ubique, quod ab omnibus*,<sup>38</sup> which, since I do not believe in a faculty which can unveil eternal verities of that kind, I cannot accept. I can only accept very close approximations to them, as I have said above.

Moreover, I believe that ultimate values sometimes collide – mercy, which is certainly a final absolute value for many, is incompatible with total justice; complete liberty and complete equality – and so on. The only universal values (in my sense, at any rate) are good and bad, true and false, and their derivatives such as right and wrong, beautiful and ugly – and so on. Since Strauss does not recognise the incompatibility of absolute values – for, according to him, all absolute values must be harmonious with

<sup>38</sup> ‘Quod ubique, quod semper, quod ab omnibus creditum est.’ *The Commonitorium of Vincentius of Lérins* (434 CE), ed. Reginald Stewart Moxon (Cambridge, 1915), 2. 3 (p. 10, lines 6–7).

each other, else what in his sense can be meant by saying that they are absolutely known a priori? – we disagree profoundly. My complaint is that he accuses me of relativism and, in effect, some kind of historicism, not in Popper’s sense, but in the sense that values depend on history and have no permanent status – which is not true of certain of my beliefs, let alone his complete neglect of the collision of equally final values. I do not think that anything I could possibly say in reply to your letter to the *New York Review of Books* would either convince yourself and other disciples of Strauss, or be news to those who accept or favour my beliefs. For that reason I see no purpose in replying to your courteous letter, and shall tell Silvers that apart from a note to the effect that I am neither a relativist nor a historicist, there is nothing that I would wish to comment upon.

I hope you will forgive me for this silence, and can only thank you for trying to persuade me to explain my position vis-à-vis Strauss, for the purpose of the advance of the human spirit and the discovery of the truth – but I do not think that anything I can write now can possibly convey what in all my writings since ‘Two Concepts of Liberty’ I have tried to emphasise. Anyone who reads most of these will know where I stand, what my reasons are, and where Strauss has got me wrong. That is all I ask for. Thank you again for your letter and all its enclosures – it was very good of you to take me up on my remarks to the Iranian interviewer, which you had a perfect right, and indeed a perfectly estimable motive, for doing.

Yours sincerely,  
Isaiah Berlin

PS I ought to add that his attack on positivism and existentialism seems to me perfectly valid, although I wish he had gone further in explaining what it was that Heidegger – whose student he was and whom he evidently respected – had added to the sum of political thought; but I have never discovered it.

TO SHIRLEY LETWIN

20 April 1993

Headington House

Dear Shirley,

I ought to have thanked you for your ‘Oakeshott’<sup>39</sup> a long time ago. People keep asking me why, given a certain community of views on some topics, I have never mentioned him, written about him, etc. There is something that gets in the way. Maybe it is more psychological than anything else, ever since the extreme froideur which followed upon an innocent remark of mine when we first met, which unfortunately he wholly misinterpreted.<sup>40</sup> He punished me later by an extremely ironical, not to say wounding, introduction to a lecture I gave at LSE over which he presided.<sup>41</sup> His name remained under a cloud in my mind. Still, I should have risen above this, and may do so yet.

I realise that I agree with quite a lot of what he thought, but think it violently exaggerated – a curious word to use about so impressionist a writer. Still, I shall try again, and in the meanwhile hope that when we meet you will allow me to tell you the story of that first meeting and his subsequent revenge. I do admit that when I heard him at the Carlyle Club, his views seemed to me a little deranged.

Yours,  
Isaiah

<sup>39</sup> Michael Oakeshott, *Morality and Politics in Modern Europe: The Harvard Lectures*, ed. Shirley Robin Letwin (New Haven and London, 1993).

<sup>40</sup> At a lunch with Oakeshott and others in Oxford in the late 1940s IB said to Oakeshott: ‘I think you ought to write a book about Hegel.’ Later during the same lunch, forgetting what he had said earlier, he remarked: ‘You know, somebody ought to write a book about Hegel; even a half-charlatan book about Hegel would be better than nothing.’ Oakeshott took this personally, and relations were thenceforth cool. See <http://bit.ly/3241r4o>.

<sup>41</sup> See 28 above.

TO THE EDITORS OF THE *NEW YORK REVIEW OF BOOKS*

Published 21 October 1993

[Headington House]

Professor O'Flaherty<sup>42</sup> is one of the most distinguished living students of Hamann's thought, and, as my friend and editor Dr Henry Hardy wrote in his preface to my book, we are both most grateful to him for the generous help he has given us in preparing my text for publication. I am only too glad to reiterate my thanks to him, but I must point out that, as Dr Hardy also made clear in his preface, there are issues on which we are not in agreement. In the letter from which Professor O'Flaherty quotes I also stated that the notion of 'intuitive reason' of which he speaks is not one that I understand. Intuition and intuitive understanding are conceptions which I believe I do understand, and which I have indeed discussed; but 'intuitive reason', whether in Hamann (as interpreted by Professor O'Flaherty) or Jacobi, in Schelling or Fichte or, apparently, Lukács, is opaque to me.

To call Hamann an anti-rationalist is to say that he attacked the methods by which the great rationalists of the seventeenth century, and their descendants and critics in the French Enlightenment (and after them such rational thinkers as Bentham, Mill, William James, Moore, Russell, and the great majority of English-speaking philosophers of our time), stated, analysed and sought to justify their views, and by which they criticized those of their opponents. It is this that makes the fact that Hamann is the first and most vehement opponent of the French Enlightenment and its descendants a phenomenon of historical importance.

It may be that my failure to identify the faculty of intuitive reason (a term not used, Professor O'Flaherty seems to say in his book *Johann Georg Hamann*, by Hamann himself) is due to some deficiency in my intellect or imagination: but it seems that Kant suffered equally from this fault. The phrase cited by Professor O'Flaherty occurs in a letter to Hamann in which Kant asks for his help in interpreting a dark passage in Hamann's disciple Herder, but begs him to reply 'in human language, if possible; for I, poor mortal, am not at all organised to understand the divine language

<sup>42</sup> To whose letter in the same issue IB is replying.

of *intuitive reason*' (as translated by Professor O'Flaherty in the same book). Nor am I so organised.

The best of all modern historians of ideas, A. O. Lovejoy, is plainly equally puzzled by this peculiar conception of reason in his book *The Reason, The Understanding, and Time*. On this issue I am happy to ally myself with Kant, Mill, Lovejoy and the admirable scholar Rudolf Unger, whose work on Hamann, no matter what the modern interpreters referred to by Professor O'Flaherty may say, seems to me (may he forgive me) entirely convincing.

[Isaiah Berlin]

TO GRETA LEIBOWITZ

1 September 1994

Headington House

Dear Mrs Leibowitz,

I was truly distressed to see that your husband was no more. As you know, I admired him immensely – I wrote a very sincere encomium to him when he was, I think, eighty, which on the whole pleased him. I remember a wonderful letter from him, in which he thanked me and said 'I have a feeling that you think I am some kind of liberal intellectual, even Tolstoyan, or even perhaps a pacifist. Certainly not. I am nothing of the kind. I believe in wars if they are absolutely necessary. My reasons for being in Israel are very simple: it is in my opinion where God wished us to be, and I wanted to be a citizen of a Jewish state, preferably democratic, but even regrettably undemocratic if the majority insisted on this. What I do not want is to live in a state which contains and governs and oppresses Arabs. This is rank imperialism, and odious to me. I want a state of Jews, governed by Jews, for Jews – let there be minorities, but do not let them be maltreated and despised and hated in the way in which we seem to hate Arabs and they us.' And so on. I was extremely pleased to receive this interesting letter, which gave me a view of him that I did not previously possess.

What can I say but what I wrote in my tribute to him? He was a man of total integrity, unswerving pursuit of the truth, uncompromising courage, a degree of uprightness which I have never known in anyone else – a moral model not only to Jews but to mankind in general. All this apart from his great intellectual

gifts, his passionate interest in philosophy – about which he talked with and wrote to me. He was always nice to me in his few letters, and I felt very proud of this; I felt that if he approved of me I had a chance of Heaven despite everything. His courage was, of course, proverbial. True, he sometimes deliberately went too far – the remark he was always criticised for, about the Nazi-like conduct of the soldiers in the Occupied Territories, did go too far, I think, but I understand why he made it – not only to attract attention to what he was saying, but for the reason once given by John Stuart Mill for making strong speeches in Parliament in favour of causes in which he believed: stronger than he felt, because he felt the pendulum had gone so far in the other direction that one had to give it a very strong swing in the right direction. Exaggeration is a fault of many great thinkers – Plato, Descartes, Hume, Kant, Russell, Wittgenstein, Hegel – only Aristotle and Locke did not.

Yours,

Isaiah Berlin

PS I ought to add that I realise that if one is possessed by [a] vision, as your husband was, one must speak passionately, and sometimes violently. Anyway, I have no criticism of him. One of the reasons why I felt so drawn to him is, of course, our family relationship.

Then letters to the Wardens of All Souls (John Sparrow, Patrick Neill) are from IB's All Souls file; those to Isaac Stern and Derrick Puffett are from box 14 of the Isaac Stern Papers in the Library of Congress; those to Robert Silvers from the New York Public Library; those to Shirley Letwin from the LSE archives. The corrections to the letter of 24 February 1984 to Karl Miller are from the *London Review of Books* papers at the Harry Ransom Center, The University of Texas at Austin, and the letter of 1 January 1980 to Edward Weeks is from Weeks's papers in the same archive.

© The Isaiah Berlin Literary Trust, Henry Hardy and Mark Pottle 2016–2019

**Most recently revised 31 October 2019**